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ABSTRACT

A school psychologist and parent looks at issues related to testing for "giftedness," including labeling and placement (or non-placement) in special programs. Factors to consider in deciding whether to have a child tested are considered, with examples given of students whose individual situations and personalities either do not qualify them for the "gifted" label but who go on to high achievement or who do not achieve in the gifted program despite the "gifted" label. Important points about interpreting intelligence quotient scores are noted, as are considerations in telling the child the results of the testing. Includes 6 references. (DB)

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Testing for Giftedness:

The Pros, Cons and Concerns

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Abstract

Testing for "giftedness" is a domain of concerns for teachers, counselors, parents, and most notably, children themselves. The issues surrounding, labeling, placement and non-placement are thorny and emotionally charged. This parent attempts to present both sides of this challenging issue so that parent/teacher/specialists can understand each other and the facts of this domain.

Johnny is a very bright young man. His teacher likes him, he gets very good grades and he helps mom at home. His teacher suggests testing for possible placement in the gifted program. His teacher, Mrs. Smith feels Johnny is not challenged, often bored, finishes his work rapidly and seems to have much potential. Johnny's mom has heard a lot about gifted kids and suicide. She is concerned about expectations and Johnny's younger sister and the effects it may have on her. Mom is ambivalent and caught between two conflicting perspectives and scenarios. She is also empathic to Johnny's feelings if he does not make the gifted cut off -- to paraphrase an old adage "What's a mother to do?"

Should I Have My Child Tested?

Seemingly, the question to test, or not to test, is a simple one. Sadly, in real life, it is not. Hopefully this paper will clarify some of the issues and address other concerns regarding testing, and more importantly, the testing process.

Testing can provide a wealth of information if done by a trained school psychologist or clinician. Strengths, weaknesses and trends can be ascertained. Parents can learn about their child's skills, abilities and potential and teachers can procure important educational information for future work. Perhaps follow-up can even be arranged.

Hopefully, the tester is diplomatic, sensitive and has good interpersonal skills. Recommendations for programs, articles, books and resources should be forthcoming. All too often, school psychologists are overwhelmed and overworked. They have to test for mental retardation, emotional disturbance, behavioral problems, attention deficit disorders, and the like. Thus, they may not have the time to provide parents with an in-depth analysis of their child's skills and abilities, strengths, and weaknesses. Some may not have much extensive expertise and should refer parents to the appropriate personnel.

There may be times when a child should not be tested. Just because older brother or sister has done well, does not mean younger brother/sister will also excel. They may have other talents or interests, sports, art, dance, theatre, drama, music or whatever. If parents do not have a clear understanding of what constitutes "giftedness," it may be unwise to push testing. Just because children are "smart" does not mean they will be gifted, nor does it mean that they will automatically be motivated to achieve. There are negative ramifications to being labeled gifted also. Kids in gifted programs are labeled show offs, smart aleck, etc.

Testing for Placement

When gifted programs are set up, there is often a "push" to recruit kids for these programs. All too often, criteria are

modified so that "high average" students are eligible. In other cases, very stringent criteria are applied and elitism is seen.

If a student is referred and obtains a "gifted I.Q." (generally above 130 on an individually administered I.Q. test), then he or she is placed and is "off and running" (or are they?).

For many children, this placement may be exactly what is needed to provide them with the extra challenge and motivation to explore and to grow toward realizing their potential. However, placement into a gifted program is not always a cure-all for the gifted child. Several other scenarios can also take place. To wit 1) Larry Lazy, I.Q. 134, does not like school all that much but has a real personality conflict with his gifted teacher, Albert Abstract, who is very keen on Bloom's taxonomy but not on the emotional needs of the gifted (Shaughnessy, 1991) Larry refuses to work and is subsequently dropped from the program. 2) Susan Sensitive, I.Q. 137, is easily upset--she cries at the drop of a pin and reacts emotionally to criticism. Her parents divorce, her dog dies and her boyfriend drops her for the ugliest girl in the school, who prior to this, had no friends. Needless to say, her therapist recommends her return to the regular classroom. 3) Danny Devious, I.Q. 140, realizes that this gifted placement is going to take time away from his espionage novels (which he reads in social studies) and his science projects (which he really enjoys with his mentor, Mr. Wizard, the

science teacher). So Danny wisecracks, is insolent, defiant, shoots paper clips and puts marbles in the hub caps of the gifted teacher's car. Needless to say he is probably asked to leave. There are certainly other scenarios and other stereotypes.

Now, on the other hand let's look at a few of the "unfortunates" who did not make the 130 cut off. 1) Peter Persistent. Pete, like the tortoise in that old Aesop's fable knows he is going to make it--and he works each night, does his work, reviews, studies, seeks extra help when needed, begs, borrows and does whatever to get through college and finally finishes his Ph.D. in seven years. 2) Explosive Ed. Ed had a lackadaisical attitude in high school and partially into college--then he found something that really interested him and he got involved in research, doing experiments, and mentored with Professor Short Fuse who really liked Ed's willingness to work and learn. Ed rocketed his way to fame and has had an astounding publication record. 3) Courteous Curt, was a shy, introvert who rarely elaborated verbally. So, he did not make the 130 cut off. The examiner did not investigate Curt's high arithmetic subtest score in the 7th grade. In the 12th grade Curt, scored 34 out of 34 on the ACT math test.

On Deciding NOT TO TEST

Deciding <u>not</u> to have a child tested is certainly a parent's right. There may however be certain long-term ramifications and repercussions (both positive and negative). Some of the immediate concerns may be:

1. Billy remains bored and unchallenged in school.
2. Billy continues to be a discipline problem. (He has been bored, remains bored, and gets into trouble because of this).
3. Billy does the bare minimum to get by.
4. Billy lowers his expectations for himself along with his self esteem.
5. Billy "hangs out" with "the other kids."
6. Billy begins to "conform" and loses his spontaneity and creativity.

On Deciding TO TEST

Deciding to test is a major step in the direction of procuring information. Irregardless of the outcome at least certain steps have been taken. These are:

1. An attempt to procure an objective, neutral assessment has been made.
2. A non-involved examiner has been used.

3. Baseline data has been procured for the charting of future growth.
4. Recommendations of a professional nature may be procured.

Regarding I.Q. Tests and I.Q. Scores

1. Note well that I.Q. tests and their resultant scores are not etched in stone. People grow, change, develop and are affected by life, death and events in their environment. Sadly, not all educators realize this.
2. Note well that I.Q. scores do not directly reflect motivation--either in the short run or in the long run.
3. Note well that parents, teachers, coaches, and mentors CAN make a difference. I owe much to my own grandmother who encouraged me long after my own mother had died. People can help, tutor, assist and facilitate in many ways.
4. There are "late bloomers" (for whatever reason). Tom Marjoran of England has investigated this phenomenon.
5. Emotional factors (divorce of parents, death, adolescent problems) can affect I.Q. scores and performance.
6. Girls particularly, often do not want to do well for social reasons.
7. Sometimes people simply "have a bad day" or are ill or under the weather or simply do not test well.

On Telling the Child

There has been some research and literature on the effects of labeling kids gifted (Ring and Shaughnessy, 1991) however, there is no clear consistent pattern discerned. There are many variables operative and at work. Parents, teachers, and counselors should maintain an accurate perspective regarding testing. Remember, the goal of testing is to gain as much information as possible regarding a child's strengths, weaknesses, and potential. If the testing (and subsequent placement) is viewed and approached as a "pass/fail" situation or a "win/lose" option, then sharing that information with a child will be difficult.

Parents, teachers, and counselors need to also be aware of peer pressure and peer pressures. All efforts made on the part of the parents, teachers, or counselors to "protect" the student from a "pass" or "fail" approach to testing may be negated by peer communication. Students are generally more aware of the implications of being taken from class (or kept after school) by the gifted teacher or counselor, for testing, than we give them credit for. The "pass/fail," placement/no placement attitude may be projected to the students by these peers.

This "good news" (gifted) and "not so good news" (high average) distinction and feeling is lost on me. As a school

psychologist I have tested mentally retarded kids, cerebral palsied adolescents, blind kids, deaf kids, partially sighted kids, children with second and third degree burns, kids in wheelchairs and kids with missing fingers. Although it may seem sad that Joe with his 126 I.Q. did not make the gifted program, it is certainly not like having spina bifida or osteogenis imperfecta. Betty with her 125 I.Q. still does not have retinopathy. Let's also keep in mind, as pointed out earlier, that Joe and Betty with a strong internal motivation may in the long run be more successful than their less motivated perhaps more "gifted" counterparts.

In summary, one must certainly be aware of the relativity of I.Q. numbers and the I.Q. trap. One must bear in mind that even examiners have bad days. Also, the child's confidence in themselves and their existing skills and abilities must not be shattered. Nor, if they <u>are</u> gifted, should they be made into little Doogie Howser's or budding scientists.

We know very little about the effects of labeling children gifted. Parents, siblings, relatives, and friends are all affected. Robinson (1989, 1990) has written on the effects of the gifted label. Jenkins-Friedman and Murphy (1988) have labeled the relationship between the gifted students' self concept and adjustment "The Mary Poppins Effect." Hershey and Oliver (1988) have explored the effects of the gifted label on those children

identified for special programs. Cornell (1989) has explored the adjustment of those children labeled gifted and the parental usage of the term. The child too is affected. Yesterday he/she was like everyone else--today he/she is "gifted." The age at which the labeling takes place is certain to be a factor. Parental and sibling support should be investigated.

Greater support, counseling, and programming for the child who does not quite make the "cut off" is imperative. The child with an I.Q. of 124 may do more for society and achieve even greater success than a child with an I.Q. of 134. Programming for highly motivated, above average I.Q. children is crucial for them and imperative for our society.

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